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Communion and Community: The Refusal to Attend the Eucharist

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# Mentalitäten und Lebensverhältnisse

Beispiele aus der  
Sozialgeschichte der Neuzeit

*Rudolf Vierhaus*  
zum 60. Geburtstag

Herausgegeben von  
Mitarbeitern und Schülern

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*Communion and Community:  
The Refusal to Attend the Eucharist  
in Sixteenth Century Protestant Württemberg\**

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

I Cor. 11:27-30 RV

There I met an old man  
Who would not say his prayers.  
I took him by the left leg  
And threw him down the stairs.  
English nursery rhyme

Sixteenth-century sources are notoriously skimpy when it comes to the question of discerning the authentic voice of the peasant. Even when the peasant is heard, it is almost always a matter of his having come to the attention of those who exercised domination over some aspect of his life. Even then his appearance is rare, and the historian who wishes to say something about peasant attitudes or values risks the distortion and banality that goes with anecdotal evidence. It may be, however, the better strategy to make a virtue out of necessity. The irony contained in the fact that we can only perceive the peasant through the eyes of rulers or their spokesmen emphasizes the important point that there is no peasant apart from domination.<sup>1</sup> All of his activity and all of his values are in part the outcome of a struggle with those who are in a position to demand something of him. If domination is an aspect of the peasant's everyday life, then sources composed by those with authority and power can be read

\* My thanks to Jonathan Knudsen, Jürgen Schlumbohm, Gerald Sider, and Robert Berdahl for comments and suggestions. I also wish to thank Hermann Ott at the Landeskirchliches Archiv for his help with the sources.

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the problem, see Jack M. Potter/May N. Diaz/George M. Foster, *Peasant Society*, Boston 1967, especially the Introduction by Foster. See also, Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs 1966.

with a careful eye for the experiences of those on the receiving end. The sources which we have may in fact be the best indication of the nature of the articulation between lord and peasant. That they are anecdotal may also be their strength.

Peasant communication itself is often story-like in character, repetitive, and highly symbolic.<sup>2</sup> When we locate a source with repetitive narratives, we encounter a form of communication which is highly suited to the task of examining peasant values systematically. By paying close attention to the precise terms of the description of a conflict in value, illicit behaviour, or protest, the historian can often reconstruct the logic of peasant behaviour and the structure of his symbolic world.

The sources for this study are the church visitation records for the Duchy of Württemberg from the 1580s available in the Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart.<sup>3</sup> Records from the church visitations were kept from the 1520s to the 1820s, although their character changed radically with time, and there are many gaps. For the sixteenth century, only the decade after 1580 is complete. In general, the records are reports made by the superintendent (*Dekan*) of each diocese upon the occasion of his annual or semi-annual inspection of each parish. Most parishes received a page or two of attention, with most of the space taken up with details about the pastor and schoolmaster. Occasionally a particular dispute between pastor and parishioners or a particularly notorious case of unchristian behaviour came in for more-or-less extended comment. In the 1580s one such recurrent case involved the refusal to attend communion on the part of some individual or individuals in a village or small town. These cases allow the historian to analyse at least in part the peasant notion of the person: his sense of guilt, the nature of human power, enmity, friendship, individuality, the collectivity, the heart, reconciliation.

In 1587 the magistrate of the town of Göppingen together with the superintendent (*Spezial*) summoned the 70 year old Lienhart Seitz from the village of Holzheim to appear before them.<sup>4</sup> The pastor had reported that the old man could not learn to pray and that he had never attended communion. Concerned for his soul, the two officials warned that if he did not learn to pray, they would have him put in chains and allow him to die and be buried like an animal. Despite this rather crude approach to the problem, they thought that he just might be too old and senile and that in any event the primary responsibility lay with those who took care of him.

2 Although not writing about peasants, Basil Bernstein's writings are a good place to start when thinking about communication processes in face-to-face societies. Cf. his *Class, Codes and Control*, vol. 1, London 1977.

3 The sources for this study are taken from the records of church visitations (Synodus Protocolle) found in the Landeskirchliches Archiv (LKA) in Stuttgart. They are cited by year, volume (when more than one per year), and folio number.

4 LKA Synodus Protocolle 1587 II, f. 203.

Accordingly, Seitz' cousin was questioned as to why he had not fulfilled his duty, but he complained that Seitz had been so impatient with the servant he had sent that the matter seemed hopeless. Nonetheless, there was no question but that the old man was mentally awake and alert, after all he was still a sharp horse trader. It was just that he could not keep the Lord's Prayer in his head. Summoned again and threatened with the jailhouse, Seitz promised to go along to the pastor and give the whole thing another try even though he did not expect much success: no matter how many times he repeated the Lord's Prayer, he always got stuck at the passage where he was supposed to forgive his enemies.

Those who have been raised in the Christian tradition will remember that the remarkable thing about the Lord's Prayer is that it is short and will also recall that the passage that stopped old Seitz each time comes practically at the end. The only way that anyone would know that he could not repeat it was if he failed at some public occasion. Seitz was refusing to partake in a public ritual, and this refusal was coupled with the fact that he also did not attend the monthly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Public ritual, reconciliation, and enmity are the elements of the story, and it is this conjuncture of themes that is to be found in the many cases involving the refusal to attend communion.

Hans Weiss from the village of Neckartailfingen had had his right hand cut off for violating his oath several times. He was subsequently confined to the village territory. Since then he had not attended communion. At the visitation, the superintendent asked him the reason for his failure to go to the Lord's Supper. He could not go because he had envy (*Neid*) and hate (*Hass*) against the village authorities who had unfairly reported him to the chief magistrate (*Vogt*). If they could, they would hound him to his death. The following year he was again reported for leaving the village during church services. He said he could not attend the Lord's Supper because the *Schultheiß* (village mayor) acted so unjustly. The latter countered that he only did his duty by punishing Weiss when he left the village during church services. His defiance was reported to the *Vogt*. Weiss then had landed up in jail and only escaped severe corporal punishment by the court's mercy. The superintendent warned him to forgive the authorities and to stop slandering them. If he did not forgive, he would not receive God's mercy. Weiss did not believe that God would let him live much longer anyway, so why didn't the authorities just chop off his head and make an end to him.

The superintendent suggested that the evil spirit had taken Weiss' heart. Weiss answered that he had never seen a devil so how could he sit in his heart? He was then asked if he believed in the devil and hell. He didn't know, it could well be. This prompted the superintendent to prove their existence from Scripture, which was then countered by Weiss: he had never seen the devil take anyone and when he died he did not wish to go to him, rather the latter would have to drag him to hell. »Does he not want to be saved?« »Yes«. But that could not happen unless he recognized his sins, pardoned his neighbor, attended church, and went along to communion. Stubbornly, Weiss went out the door. The only thing to be done with such a defiant, envious, stubborn person, the superintendent reflected, was to put him in jail until he saw the error of his ways.<sup>5</sup>

5 LKA Synodus Protocolle 1587 I, f. 220.

The issues in this confrontation turn around alternative conceptions of physical and mystical danger, the relationship of the physical to the spiritual, and the connection of the individual to the collectivity. Hans Weiss chose to interpret the superintendent's warning about the devil in a corporeal sense. His answer and the dialogue between the two men was not really about the existence of God nor about that of the devil: in the end, he too was concerned about his salvation. Underlying his dispute with the superintendent was a difference in the logic of corporeal action. The superintendent conceived of the heart as a battle-place between God and the devil. This cosmic struggle or drama was reenacted in the heart of each individual and had to do with personal salvation. What dangers and possibilities existed had only to do with the individual. As the superintendent saw it, the issue resided in the individual putting his heart at God's disposal by forgiving his enemies. Weiss also made the heart central by reference to envy and hate, but he did not conceive of his heart as a battleground, a cosmic drama, between God and the devil. The real danger, as he made clear, would have been to partake of the eucharist in a ritual state of envy. In his behaviour, he maintained a public, openly declared enmity with the village authorities. He challenged them to kill him but refused to place himself in the greater (mystical) danger that they tried to force him into. From Weiss' point of view the envy and hate he had in his heart arose from injustice within the village and from his relationship with the Schultheiss. While on the one hand the civil authorities had been the cause of his hatred, on the other the church authorities were putting him in mystical danger through the ordeal of the eucharist.

The thrust then of what the superintendent tried to interpret as an issue of personal salvation was at the same time a matter of social control. In principle every member of the community was subjected once a month to the ordeal of examining his heart for resentment. One either had to reconcile oneself to the authorities – to forgive – or face mystical danger in taking the communion. The biblical text, hammered time and again from the pulpit, was clear – anyone who ate and drank unworthily, ate and drank »judgment upon himself«. As is clear from the visitation reports, an individual could get away with failing to attend the eucharist a few times, but after that the pastor brought pressure. If he had no success, the superintendent and the civil authorities were alerted. When argument, warning, and threat did not work, then recourse was had to jail. Still the authorities did not have everything on their side, because there was an alternative conception of the meaning of the failure to attend the eucharist. In the first place, not going to communion was a public act symbolizing a break in the community, a quarrel (*Span*), a state of enmity. Such a rift had danger for the community at large as we shall see from later examples. There was certainly an alternative concept current among villagers to that of the church authorities – namely that failure to attend the eucharist had

only consequences for the individual –, which was rooted in the notion that a person whose heart was in a state of envy and hatred could exercise a general physical threat to members of the community at large and probably towards those towards whom the hatred was directed. It is not necessary that Hans Weiss held consistently to one position or the other, but it must be kept in mind that his state of enmity would have been interpreted by many as a threat in itself.

The theme of quarrel as establishing a condition within which attendance of communion would be unthinkable recurs in many of the reports. Such a case was reported from the village of Feuerbach where Hans Alber had not gone to communion for some time.<sup>6</sup> His excuse was a quarrel with his brother over the inheritance to a farm. He was waiting for the court to settle the matter, after which he would forgive his brother from his heart and attend the Lord's Supper. In some ways, the elements found here are similar to those in the previous case – the action turns around the conjunction of heart, forgiveness, and communion. Alber was not at all prepared to place himself in danger by taking the eucharist while his heart was in an improper state. However, the solution to the problem suggested by Alber throws sharper light on both cases. The internal condition of the heart arose from a situation that was external to the individual and could be set aside by formal steps taken by an institution, in this case the court. The state of quarrel arose from a conflict over property, an ambiguity in the apportionment of rights. It was a formal condition that could be put aside once a judgment had been offered. Until then a public state of conflict prevailed. Once the ambiguity had been dealt with, the conditions no longer pertained, and forgiveness was automatically to follow. The »hatred and envy« appear not to have been subject to the individual's control but defined a ritual state deriving from the legal ambiguity of property rights. Alber saw no contradiction in forgiving his brother once the rights had been clarified by the court: the memory of injustice was not enough to maintain enmity with his brother. As in the previous case, non-participation in the eucharist was the formal, public recognition of a quarrel. Hatred or a heart in an improper state to receive communion existed coincidentally with the fissure in social relations. Alber recognized a formal procedure for setting the heart right, but Weiss could see no solution except in his own death, since for him the matter lay in the hands of the authorities who had demonstrated no goodwill towards him. Forgiveness, setting aside hatred, and putting the heart in order do not seem to be subject to one-sided, individual action.

Part of the problem in understanding the situations encountered in the visitations turns around the question of guilt as an internalized emotion. What was at issue for the church authorities was not just the notion of

6 LKA Synodus Protocolle 1587 I, f. 138.

individual responsibility before God but the idea of an emotion of guilt which could prompt the individual to seek God's forgiveness. But an alternative notion of the relation of the external to the internal, or the collectivity to the individual, is often revealed in these confrontations. The case of the widow Theinlin from Varmbronn near Leonberg demonstrates how guilt could be seen as arising from a condition external to the individual – as rooted in the public opinion of the collectivity.<sup>7</sup> The widow was called in by the superintendant because she had not attended the Lord's Supper for 12 years. She related this to the fact that during the entire period she was involved in a libel action (*Schmachhandel*). Many people had accused her of being a witch. After a warning, she declared herself ready to communicate, but she failed to appear. In the meantime, someone had slandered her son, calling him a demon (*Unhold*). She then took the matter to the court in Leonberg. If she was to win her case, she would then come to communion as innocent (*unschuldig*). The widow Theinlin appears to have been using here a notion of guilt that was formal and legal. It was in some way external to her will and proceeded from her notion of the public. The question of her guilt could be settled one way or other in the courts, but until judgment was passed her status would remain ambiguous and her guilt not disproven. It is because her innocence was not yet established that she could not attend communion. The external conditions not being right, her heart could not be said to be in a »worthy« condition. The logic of the conflict here suggests that it would have been possible to be a witch – someone who could give off evil influence – without either wanting to or knowing about it. The Church's notion of guilt as conscious and following from wrongdoing was not the issue for the woman. The court could establish whether she was a witch, whether without willing it she could have had an evil influence in the community.

In the village of Neckarhausen, Mathias Dettinger had not gone to communion for six years. Both the Schultheiss and the pastor had talked with him but to no avail. He told one village member that many people went to the Lord's Supper every four weeks to swill the wine but remained exactly as they were before. They gnawed on God's leg end chewed (*fressen*) him right up. The pastor said that Dettinger was generally selfish and quarrelsome and no one could come near him. The superintendant asked why this was so. He said he had many enemies who would not let him prosper. He asked God all the time for the Holy Spirit so that he could forgive his enemies. At home above the table, he had a picture of the Last Supper. This was a reminder to him of the bitter suffering and death of Christ and was as good as receiving the sacrament. Many hypocrites go to the Lord's Supper and want to bite off the feet of God and the saints. For such blasphemy, Dettinger would not be punished with the jailhouse alone.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> LKA Synodus Protocolle 1582, f. 118.

<sup>8</sup> LKA Synodus Protocolle 1586 f. 177. – It does not seem to me here that the case deals with anabaptist thinking. At least that is not the kernel to the argument. See the discussion in Franklin Hamlin Littel, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, Boston 1958<sup>2</sup>, p. 98–101.

In the town of Kirchheim unter Teck, Bartle Ganser had not taken the sacrament for 28 years. His explanation to the pastor for his godless life was that he could not forgive his enemies. Even if God appeared that day or the next, he would not be able to forgive them. To the superintendant he said that as soon as his court case was taken care of, he would show himself as a Christian. The superintendant said that he expected Ganser would always start new proceedings, would not forgive, and would not go to communion.<sup>9</sup>

Also in the same town, Jacob Heer had not gone to communion for 4 years. He gave as his excuse the great enmity (*Feindschaft*) he had against the *Bürgermeister* and other officials. How could he go to the Lord's Supper and see in front of him his enemies, who had treated him so unjustly. He found it strange that they could go in good conscience. He acted so angry that the superintendant and pastor were afraid of him.<sup>10</sup>

In the village of Bottnang there was an old woman, crippled on her hands and feet. Despite her misery she had remained from the Lord's Supper for several years. She was warned that in her great poverty she would want to receive the blessedness (*Seligkeit*) of the holy sacrament. She said simply that she would never go and no one could talk her into it no matter what was done with her. Her attitude stemmed from the accusation that the old Schützin was a demon (*Unhold*) (many people suspected this woman) who rode her at night and thus brought her to poverty. The old woman also said that she had outstanding proceedings in the courts against the old Schützin. The superintendant told her to let her envy drop, otherwise she would get buried like an animal without a sermon or ceremony.<sup>11</sup>

The notions of »enemy« (*Feind*) and »quarrel« (*Span*) are fundamental in analysing the villagers' notion of the person. They suggest that the »person« existed in a field of friend/enemy, insider/outsider, permanent/occasional. The kinds of danger consonant with the institutions discussed here arose from permanent relationships of people living together in a village or small town. The village was divided into friends and enemies or into those who could exercise unconscious mystical harm and those who could not. More will be made of these distinctions later on, but here the issues have to do with conscious enmity. The relationship of enmity could arise in several contexts. In so far as matters could be settled by legal action, they could be solved. Even in the last story, which centered the action on an old woman's accusation of witchcraft, the real point was tagged on as a kind of afterthought. She was in a legal conflict with the woman she accused of witchcraft and in that state could not go to communion anyway. Her quarrel at once put herself in ritual danger should she go to communion in an »unworthy« state. But behind her action is also the notion that so long as an open conflict existed, she herself because of envy and hate in her heart exercised mystical influence. This notion will be taken up later, but it is unclear from the examples just how this mystical influence is to be understood. It may be that a rift in the community posed general danger to its members, that is, that mystical influence could be exercised by an individual without conscious desire and without specific malevolence

<sup>9</sup> LKA Synodus Protocolle 1587 II, f. 210ff.

<sup>10</sup> LKA Synodus Protocolle 1587 II, f. 209.

<sup>11</sup> LKA Synodus Protocolle 1584 II, f. 216.



towards people who suffered the consequences. This would mean that it was in the interest of the community to insure justice and reconciliation for its members. Refusal on the part of an individual to attend communion put him in a ritual state offering danger to the community at large and thereby warning the community to see that justice was done. A dispute, an ambiguity in the law, a sense of injustice brought into play powerful mystical forces. It might also be the case that enmity carried a specific threat. That is, by remaining away from communion and putting her own soul in danger, the old woman provided herself with the possibility of countering the witchcraft of her enemy – a means of specific attack. I suspect that there is a contrast here between two means of action. Witchcraft is deliberate, malevolent, practised, and learned. The mystical influence which proceeds from the heart in a ritualized state of unreconciliation is not exercised consciously and is unspecific in its effect.<sup>12</sup> The conscious magic breaks community, while the unconscious mystical influence reintegrates at a deeper level by setting the collectivity at large at risk and warning the public to see that justice be done. In this situation »enemy« was a formal category and »quarrel« became institutionalised publicly. Non-attendance at the eucharist was the public symbol of the state of feud.

Such conceptions also show that the relationship of the individual to the community was central to an understanding of communion. One moment where the alternative conceptions were articulated was in the administration of the eucharist to the sick. In the 1580s, many pastors refused any longer to carry out certain customary practices. Two examples can be examined here.

In Kleinsachsenheim, it had been an old custom to ring a bell when a sick person was to receive communion at his home. This would be a warning to all good hearted (*guthertzi-gen*) people to come along and partake with him. The pastor had done away with the custom in the recent plague. The villagers (*armen leüt*) requested that the superintendent command the pastor to continue the usage as he had found it.<sup>13</sup>

In Gerlingen at the recent visitation, the Schultheiss and village court complained about the change of customary practices. Since the time that the gospel had been preached in the village (i.e. since the Reformation), it had been a Christian practice, without any hint of superstition (*Aberglaube*), to send the sacristan (*Messner*) through the streets with a bell whenever a sick person was to receive communion. Since the village had gotten so large and populous, not everyone knew who was sick. By ringing the bell, a signal was given whereby many people came along to aid in calling on God to help the weak and at the same time to offer instruction and consolation. Especially, however, at that moment the well-off sent a little wine and something to eat to the needy and poor. Now that the bell

12 Recent analysis of witchcraft distinguishes between those individuals who actively practice arts which are meant to harm specific individuals (or are thought to) and others who can harm without intent and often with no specific target. The classic statement of the problem is found in E. R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, New York 1966, pp. 19–27. An important discussion of the various arguments is found in Marc Augé, *Théorie des pouvoirs et idéologie*, Paris 1975, pp. 85–233.

13 LKA Synodus Protocolle 1585 II, f. 202.

was no longer rung, these activities have largely ceased. The old custom came to an end the last time the plague raged so violently in the village. The petitioners requested that the pastor reinstate the custom. A marginal note by the superintendent said that this custom existed in many villages. It caused the well to remember that they could easily fall sick and die. Even if one did not share communion in the house with the sick, out of sympathy he could say the Lord's Prayer.<sup>14</sup>

The custom in the first village had been done away with by the pastor. In the second, it had stopped with the last plague. However, since the village magistrates brought the complaint and stressed that no superstition was involved, it is clear that whatever role the pastor had played in bringing the custom to an end, he had no desire to revive it. From the actions of the pastors, then, it is clear that quite precisely superstition was the issue. As a widespread practice, ringing the bell when a sick person was about to take communion rose with the Reformation.<sup>15</sup> There had been no room for it in the old, Catholic (prereformation) rite. The new custom was a response to the redefinition of the rite. To some degree, the Reformation had demystified the event of the communion itself – to a greater extent by Calvin than by Luther.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, a new moral element was introduced. The rite took place in the vernacular and stressed a voluntary aspect. In Württemberg, one had to go to the pastor beforehand and register an intention to participate in communion. This gave the pastor an opportunity to discuss a person's behaviour and moral standing. The whole event turned on the issue of »worthiness«, for the individual with an unprepared heart ate and drank »judgment upon himself«. Preparation in the Catholic practice was preceded by confession, while in the Protestant by an inner examination of the heart. Even here, however, the Reformation had a communal as well as an individualistic side. To be sure communion had to do with the individual's damnation, not the community's. Then too, he registered privately with the pastor, although an alternative would have been a public service of confession and testimony. In the Church's view, there was no public danger from an individual's unworthiness – or at least this aspect was greatly underplayed. The communal aspect was the public rite itself, the stress on reconciliation, the sermon. Whatever danger there was was spiritual and existed for the individual.

The connection between worthiness and mystical danger was taken up by the rural population and concretized in a new custom. They reinter-

14 LKA Synodus Protocolle 1582, f. 117.

15 At least this was the testimony of the villagers. Some of the controversy over ringing bells can be found in the article by Nikolaus Müller, *Glocken*, in: *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 6, Leipzig 1899, pp. 703–709.

16 See the article by G. Rietschel, *Abendmahlsfeier in den Kirchen der Reformation*, in: *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1896, pp. 68–76. For a discussion of superstition and communication, see Oskar Rühle, *Abendmahl*, in: *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, vol. 1, Berlin etc. 1927, pp. 42–55.

preted the mystical danger in terms of the collectivity and drew conclusions which, as far as the pastors were concerned, were superstitions. The example from Kleinsachsenheim is very terse but makes a central point. »Good hearted« people would go along to the sick person. What it means to have a »good heart« can be inferred from the earlier cases – one without »envy« or »hate«. Here the implication is a heart without envy or hate directed against the sick person. Mystical strength was given to the sick person by sharing communion with him. Communion itself was the test because anyone with envy or hate would fear the dangers of joining in. It is also a test in another way: those who unexpectedly did not come along, had something to fear and were therefore suspect as having ill will against the sick person, who by their hate and envy exercised mystical danger. The sick person was a victim of his opponents' hatred.

Such an interpretation is strengthened by the second example – from Gerlingen. The fundamental aspect was also there, namely that people were to come along and share in the communion and to pray with the sick person. But an important second element was added. The more prosperous members of the village were supposed to send food and drink to the poor. This suggests that the danger to the sick person was generalized to the village level. Envy and hate in the village at large could be the cause of an individual's illness, not just malice directed specifically at him. Some activity was necessary to reestablish a moral unity in case the danger arose from this point. Thus the rectification of the social rift was centered in two meals – the mystical communion where the individual was surrounded by his friends and neighbors – those withstanding the moral test – and the redistributive gift or sharing along the axis rich/poor. Thus the social division between prosperous and needy was considered by the villagers as one important direction from which danger through hate and envy could arise. The moral unity/disunity of the village was captured in the notion that sickness could arise from it. The individual was not free morally, spiritually, or physically from the state of the collectivity of which he was a part. And an important aspect of social structure as they perceived it was difference in wealth. The stress on unity, health, and wholeness, so dear to the historian of village life, is just the obverse of the everyday experience of fear, envy, and danger.

One can see here why superstition was precisely the issue, for the pastors refused to accept the possibility of physical danger to the individual arising from the moral disunity in the community. God might justly visit sickness on the individual in retribution for his sins or to test his faith. He might even go after a community or whole society to call them back to Himself. But His actions arise from His will and are not subject to human logical connections. In any event, display of His power was directed towards awakening the sense of personal guilt. The alternative conception saw one possible danger point in the generalized envy of the poor against

the rich. The pastors tried to stop the custom of ringing the bell and to privatise the administration of communion to a sick individual. The point was precisely not to let everyone know that the event was taking place. The superintendent, on the other hand, was willing to let the practice continue but offered a reinterpretation. When the bell rang, it was to serve as a reminder to the well that they too would someday fall ill and die. They should prepare themselves spiritually. This put emphasis on the individual's relationship with God and at once established the matter on a subjective plane. It cut out any sense of dangerous mystical influence from person to person. Nonetheless, there was a communal element in the superintendent's remarks. One could go along and share in the eucharist. If not, one should pray (recite the Lord's Prayer) for the sick person out of sympathy. The sense of the individual here was a subjective one, one who shared in another's sorrows and who was concerned in this way for his own salvation. Ultimately, though, he was alone, unmediated before God. For the villager, there was danger from his fellows, from his neighbors, from his family. He was not divorced nor divorceable from the others. His unity was part of the unity of other things – the family, the neighborhood, the village. He could be threatened physically by the disunity found there (in the form of envy or hatred) – and he could threaten.

The issue which follows from these notions for the historian is not »individualism« but rather the »person«. Ultimately, all of these people were individuals and perceived themselves as such. No anthropologist has ever come back from the field convinced that he was dealing with anything but individuals. »Person« is a better term for capturing relations and mediations. Someone whose inner states can influence the physical well-being of another conceives of the person differently from one who reduces the relation to one of sympathy. One finds occasionally in the literature references to the »Western« tradition of the »heart« or the integrity of the »person«. <sup>17</sup> But it should be noted that the »tradition« referred to is that of the dominant and fails to recognize that there are many views in the West of the person, which can be discovered by contextual studies of the dominated.

The mystical power that threatened a person arose from relations within the family, neighborhood, or village. It did not come from »outside« – not the envy of the poor in general but of the poor in »this village« gave rise to the conditions from which evil consequence flowed. The village did not bound totally the population from which danger could proceed; sometimes individuals from outside were identified as posing a threat. But the multiple strands of relationships within the village or parish were the set of relations from which primary danger flowed. It was, of course, in the context of the village that the practice of ringing the bells stopped and in

<sup>17</sup> For example, Roy Willis, *Man and Beast*, St. Albans 1974, pp. 84–88.

both cases the incident which prompted the action was the visitation of the plague. During the 1580s it was quite usual for upwards of a hundred people to die in the space of a month or so in a village of 6 or 700 people.<sup>18</sup> It was characteristic of the plague that it would rage in one village one year and leave the neighboring villages untouched, perhaps visiting them a few years later. In such a case, the village as a moral isolate would have been more than ever emphasized. With the notion that sickness could result from the ill-will of others, the frequent deaths resulting from the plague might well have pitted groups against each other in frantic efforts to overcome the evil will of others not by a policy of reconciliation but of mutual defense and aggression. The alternative interpretations of custom by pastor and villagers would have been starkly revealed. In any event we can assume that the plague was not the occasion of religious revival and moral regeneration.

It is common in considering the peasants of central Europe to emphasize their fundamental conservatism, to argue that their world-view amounts to no more than a demand to maintain old customs or the »old law«.<sup>19</sup> In this case, however, the reestablishment of the custom demanded by the villagers refers to one which they were conscious of being no more than 40 or 50 years old. Here is an instance where the active shaping of custom took place, where custom can be seen in turn to be not conservative but to be one of the factors which gives shape to history.<sup>20</sup> It is also clear here that custom arises in a context of domination and should be analysed in this context. The custom of ringing the bell when the sick were to receive communion arose with the Reformation not because social differences or conflict between family members was anything new at that time. What was new was the way the institution of the eucharist became the field on which conflicts, aggression, and fears were played out. The two sides, church officials and village members, met with two different notions of the person. When the Church said the individual was in danger when he partook of the eucharist with envy in his heart, villagers accepted this. But the mystical danger from envy was not just to the individual. The eucharist could become a way of revealing attitudes, making them public, but also a way of revealing danger. Commensality, however, could also offer protection –

18 The plague data comes from the examination of several parish registers for the region south of Stuttgart. More information will be provided in a forthcoming study of the population of the village of Neckarhausen by the author.

19 For an interesting revision of the »old law« concept, see Karl Heinz Burmeister, *Genossenschaftliche Rechtsfindung und herrschaftliche Rechtssetzung*, in: Peter Blickle (Hg.), *Revolte und Revolution in Europa*, München 1975 (*Historische Zeitschrift*, N. F. Beiheft 4), pp. 171–185.

20 For a similar view, see Gerald M. Sider, *Family Fun in Starve Harbour: Custom, History and Confrontation in Village Newfoundland*, in: Hans Medick/David Sabean (ed.), *Emotion and Material Interest in Family and Kinship*. *Anthropological and Historical Contributions to the Study of the Family*, Cambridge, forthcoming.

the commensality of the eucharist with its higher magic and the commensality of shared staples repairing symbolically the moral rupture inherent in different levels of wealth. The everyday disruptions and dissensions were »healed« or revealed once a month when every village member underwent the ordeal of proving the state of his heart. It furnished both the opportunity of reconciliation and of threat. None of the elements here can be seen as quintessentially »popular«.<sup>21</sup> The notion of the »heart«, the danger in the eucharist, mystical danger as such – none of these should be seen as purely stemming from the popular substratum or somehow encapsulated from the dominating powers. The notion of the person results from the dialectic between dominant and dominated. In so far as domination is part of everyday experience, it is embedded in personality but not in the terms foreseen by the dominating powers.

21 For an important analysis of popular culture, which contrasts somewhat with the views expressed here, see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London 1978, pp. 4–87.